

Exploring Dutch and French constructions through corpus-based pedagogy:

The case of *een schat van een kind* (lit. ‘a treasure of a child’)

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Constructionist Approaches to Language Pedagogy (CALP-5)
University of Tromsø - The Arctic University of Norway (UiT)

1. INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction – Context

- **FNRS contact group: “Constructions across Languages: Corpus-Based Approaches”**
 - **Co-Presidents:**
 - Kristel Van Goethem (F.R.S.-FNRS & UCLouvain)
 - Gudrun Vanderbauwhede (UMONS)
 - **Secretary:**
 - Isa Hendrikx (ULiège)
 - **Members in Belgium, France, Germany and Italy:**
 - Lobke Ghesquière (UMONS), Manon Hermann (UCL/UNamur/ UAntwerpen), Philippe Hilgsmann (UCLouvain), Jürgen Jaspers (ULB), Marie-Aude Lefer (UCLouvain), Julien Perrez (ULiège), Nathanaël Stilmant (UMONS), Wout Van Praet (ULiège), Bert Cappelle (ULille), Peter Lauwers (UGent), Francesca Masini (UniBo), Muriel Norde (HU Berlin), Valentina Piunno (UniBg), Isabelle Robert (UAntwerpen)

1. Introduction – Context

- **Contact group objectives:**

- Strengthen collaboration between researchers comparing linguistic constructions across languages.
- Base research on analyses of corpora of authentic texts and translation corpora.
- Focus on comparing Dutch and French, while including other European languages.
- Analyze empirical results within the framework of Construction Grammar.

- **Long-term output:**

- Publication of teaching manual on comparing Dutch and French constructions through corpora.
- Case studies such as the EBC to illustrate contrastive insights.

1. Introduction – Teaching manual

Part 1: Introduction to Corpus Research

- What is corpus research?
- Contrastive research French-Dutch
- Applications

Part 2: Case studies

- Case study on **comparative corpus research**: The 'een schat van een kind' construction in Dutch and French
- Introduction to the use of **translation corpora**: a study of French discourse markers and their Dutch equivalents
- From contrastive study to **learner corpus research**: The use of compounds in Dutch by French-speaking learners

Part 3: Practical guide

- Setting up contrastive corpus research
- Methodological basis
 - Software and tools
 - Qualitative versus quantitative approaches
- Challenges in contrastive corpus research
- Applications in research and education

1. Introduction – Case study

• **Evaluative Binominal Construction**

• The EBC pattern:

- [DET1 N1 PREP DET2 N2]
- e.g., *a hell of a day*, *ce bijou de livre* ‘lit. this jewel of a book’, *een schat van een kind* ‘a treasure of a child’

• Why this construction?

- Productive in DU & FR
- Expresses subtle evaluative meanings
- Ideal for hands-on corpus analysis
- Example of a comparable corpus analysis (cf. Van Goethem (2023) and Van Goethem, Piunno & Hendrikx (subm.))

Outline

1. Introduction

2. Case study: The Evaluative
Binominal Construction

3. Pedagogical implications

2. CASE STUDY

The Evaluative Binominal Construction (EBC)

- **Examples:**

- EN *a hell of a day*
- FR *cette saleté de médicament* ‘this dirty medication’ (lit. this dirt of medication)
- DU *een schat van een kind* ‘a lovely child’ (lit. a treasure of a child)

- **Structure:** [DET1 N1 PREP (DET2) N2]

- Semi-schematic construction
 - Only the preposition is fixed
 - All other slots are subject to variation

- **Non-literal meaning:**

- “N2 showing to an extraordinary degree characteristic features of N1 (subjective-evaluative)” (translated from Verhagen 2005: 202)
 - N1 → extraordinary (physical or abstract) quality (often metaphorical value)
 - N2 → entity to which this quality is attributed

State of the art

- **Studies on single languages:**

- Dutch (a.o. Paardekooper 1956, Verhagen 2005, [Van Goethem 2023](#))
- English (a.o. Aarts 1994, 1998, [ten Wolde 2023](#))
- French (a.o. Regula 1965, Larrivée 1994)
- Italian (Alinei 1971)
- Arabic (Vallaro 1993)

- **Cross-linguistic studies:**

- Germanic and Romance languages (a.o. Foolen 2004, Simone *in press*, [Van Goethem, Piunno & Hendriks submitted](#))
- Romance languages (a.o. Tutescu 1969, [Piunno 2025](#))

→ blue color = corpus-based studies

→ Corpus-based cross-linguistic studies are still scarce

Research goal & questions

Research goal

- A **corpus-based cross-linguistic constructionist analysis** of the EBC in Dutch and French
 - To determine whether the properties attributed to this construction in the literature can actually be confirmed by the corpus data
 - To determine the similarities and differences between the Dutch and French construction

Research question

- What are the main **cross-linguistic similarities and differences** between the EBC in the four languages under study?
 - Formal properties
 - Semantic properties
 - Productivity

Implementation of constructionist corpus research in pedagogy

- **Master's course on *Construction Grammar*** at UCLouvain, Belgium
 - Dutch linguistics for French-speaking students
 - Spring semester 2024
 - Each student was assigned a particular pattern of the Dutch EBC (e.g., [*een pracht van een N*], [*een draak van een N*])
- The students were guided through **all stages of the research process**:
 - Data collection and filtering (Sketch Engine)
 - Annotation and categorization (Excel)
 - Group discussions of problematic cases
 - Reporting of corpus findings (written paper and oral exam)
- **Parallel corpus study for the French data** by Van Goethem & Hendrikx



Corpus data

Sketch Engine: <https://www.sketchengine.eu>

- TenTen corpus family
- Corpus data collected from the Internet

Dutch

- nlTenTen20 (5,9 billion tokens) 2020

French

- frTenTen23 (23.8 billion words) 2022-2023

Concordance function – CQL queries

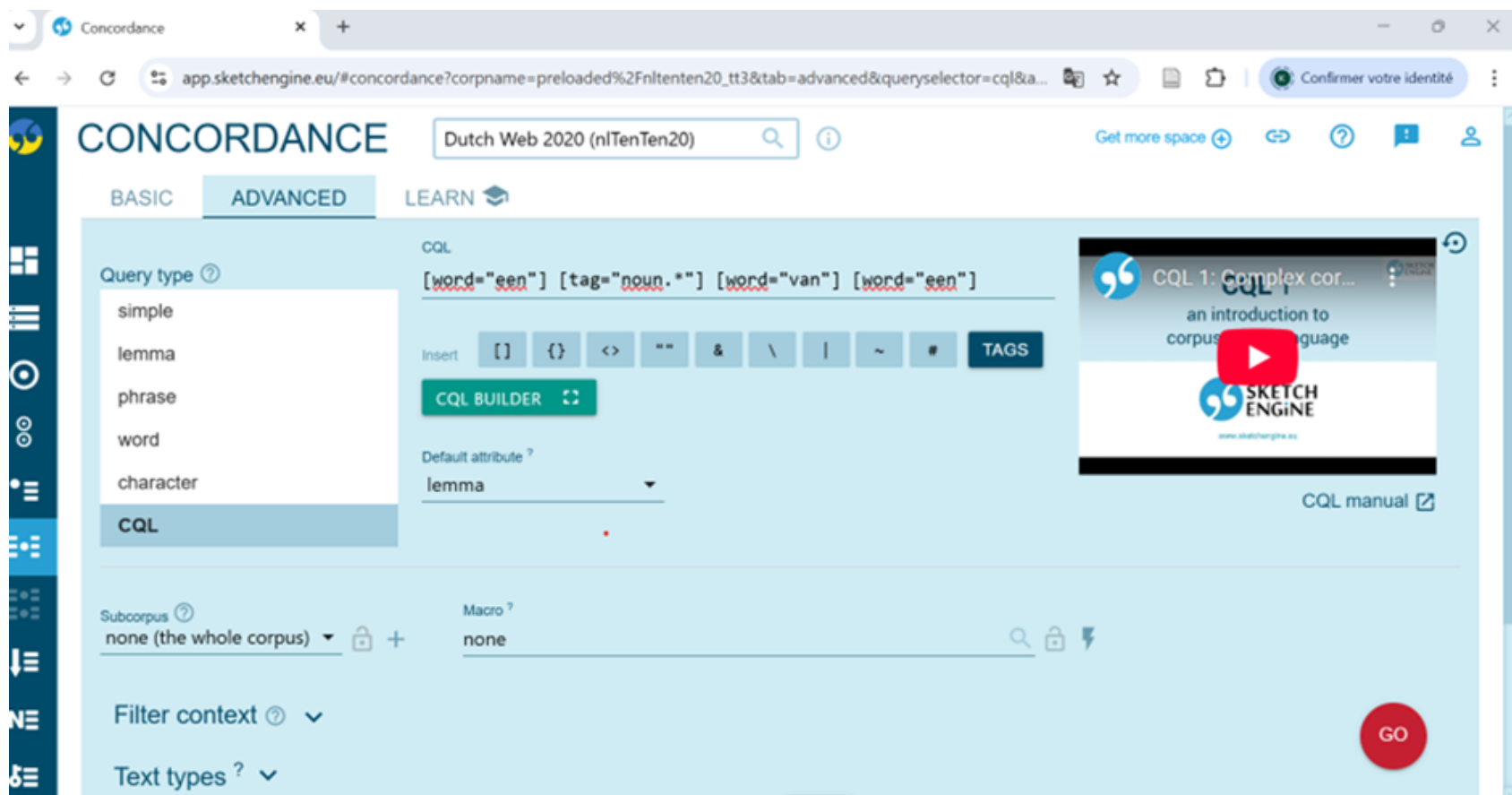
Combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis

Data extraction

STEP 1: Extraction of the top 15 EBC patterns per language

- General Query (after trial-and-error):
 - DU [word="een"] [tag="noun.*"] [word="van"] [word="een"]
 - FR [word="ce|cette|cet|ces"] [tag="N.*"] [word="de"]
- Extract and clean frequency list → top 15 EBC patterns per language
- General analysis of frequency and semantic properties of top 15

Concordance



The screenshot displays the Sketch Engine Concordance interface. The browser address bar shows the URL: `app.sketchengine.eu/#concordance?corpname=preloaded%2FnlTenTen20_tt3&tab=advanced&queryselector=cql&a...`. The page title is "CONCORDANCE" and the search corpus is "Dutch Web 2020 (nlTenTen20)".

The interface is divided into three tabs: "BASIC", "ADVANCED", and "LEARN". The "ADVANCED" tab is selected. On the left, a "Query type" dropdown menu is open, showing options: "simple", "lemma", "phrase", "word", "character", and "CQL". The "CQL" option is highlighted.

The main query area contains the following CQL query: `[word="een"] [tag="noun.*"] [word="van"] [word="een"]`. Below the query, there is an "Insert" toolbar with symbols for brackets, curly braces, less-than-greater-than, double quotes, ampersand, backslash, vertical bar, tilde, and hash. A "TAGS" button is also present. A "CQL BUILDER" button is located below the toolbar.

The "Default attribute" dropdown is set to "lemma".

At the bottom of the interface, there are fields for "Subcorpus" (set to "none (the whole corpus)") and "Macro" (set to "none"). There are also "Filter context" and "Text types" dropdowns.

A video player is embedded on the right side of the interface, showing a video titled "CQL 1: Complex cor... an introduction to corpus language" with the Sketch Engine logo and website URL `www.sketchengine.eu`. A red "GO" button is located at the bottom right of the interface.

Frequency list

Concordance

app.sketchengine.eu/#concordance?corpname=preloaded%2FnlTenTen20_tt3&tab=advanced&queryselector=cql&a...

CONFIRMER VOTRE IDENTITÉ

CONCORDANCE Dutch Web 2020 (nlTenTen20)

CQL [word="een"] [tag="noun.*"] [word="van"] [word="een"] • 471,922
69.02 per million tokens • 0.0069%

Frequency [CHANGE CRITERIA](#) [BACK TO CONCORDANCE](#)

Show relative frequency Show percentage of concordance lines

(41,019 items, 471,922 total frequency)

	Lemma	Frequency	Relative ?	% of conc. ?	
1	<input type="checkbox"/> een voorbeeld van een	14,610	2.14	3.10 %	<div style="width: 3.10%;"></div> ...
2	<input type="checkbox"/> een foto van een	11,160	1.63	2.36 %	<div style="width: 2.36%;"></div> ...
3	<input type="checkbox"/> een fluitje van een	8,886	1.30	1.88 %	<div style="width: 1.88%;"></div> ...
4	<input type="checkbox"/> een deel van een	8,762	1.28	1.86 %	<div style="width: 1.86%;"></div> ...
5	<input type="checkbox"/> een combinatie van een	8,371	1.22	1.77 %	<div style="width: 1.77%;"></div> ...

Frequency: top 15

	Dutch	French
1	<i>een dijk van een</i>	<i>ce/cette putain de</i>
2	<i>een pracht van een</i>	<i>ce/cette drôle de</i>
3	<i>een schat van een</i>	<i>cette saloperie de</i>
4	<i>een joekel van een</i>	<i>ce con de</i>
5	<i>een draak van een</i>	<i>cette saleté de</i>
6	<i>een beest van een</i>	<i>ce monstre de</i>
7	<i>een juweel van een</i>	<i>ce diable de</i>
8	<i>een kanjer van een</i>	<i>ce salaud de</i>
9	<i>een droom van een</i>	<i>ce connard de</i>
10	<i>een parel van een</i>	<i>ce bijou de</i>
11	<i>een knaller van een</i>	<i>cet imbécile de</i>
12	<i>een dot van een</i>	<i>cet idiot de</i>
13	<i>een boom van een</i>	<i>cet abruti de</i>
14	<i>een beer van een</i>	<i>cette merde de</i>
15	<i>een kast van een</i>	<i>cet enfoiré de</i>

Frequency: top 15

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1	<i>een dijk van een</i>	<i>ce/cette putain de</i>
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5	<i>een draak van een</i>	<i>cette saleté de</i>
6	<i>een beest van een</i>	<i>ce monstre de</i>
7	<i>een juweel van een</i>	<i>ce diable de</i>
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10	<i>een parel van een</i>	<i>ce bijou de</i>
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14	<i>een beer van een</i>	<i>cette merde de</i>
15	<i>een kast van een</i>	<i>cet enfoiré de</i>

Data extraction

STEP 2: Detailed analysis of the top 15 EBC constructions per language

- More **specific query** including N1 lemma
 - DU [tag="det.*"]? [lemma="dijk"] [lemma="van"]
 - FR [tag="det.*"]? [lemma="monstre"] [lemma="de"]
- **Random samples** of 1000 occurrences per subpattern
- **Manual check** until 100 relevant occurrences per pattern
- **Final datasets** of 15x 100 relevant occurrences per language = **3000 relevant occurrences in total**
- Examples of **excluded occurrences**:
 - *Er zou een schat van een farao (...) verborgen zijn in de vaas boven op het monument.* 'A treasure of a pharaoh (...) is said to be hidden in the vase on top of the monument.'
 - *Un homme s'approcha, je le reconnaissais c'est lui qui avais [sic] empêché ce monstre de me tuer.* 'A man approached; I recognized him, it was he who had prevented that monster from killing me.'

Random sample

Concordance

app.sketchengine.eu/#concordance?corpname=preloaded%2FnlTenTen20_tt3&tab=advanced&queryselector=cql&a...

CONFORDANCE Dutch Web 2020 (nlTenTen20)

CQL [tag="det.*"]? [lemma="dijk"] [lemma="van"] • 16,141
2.36 per million tokens • 0.00024%

Get a random sample

	Left context	Get a random sample	Right context
1	devriesboeken.n... lie bij maanlicht jagen op vuurvliegjes, op de beroemde	dijk van	Ama-no-Hashidate.</s><s>Kader Abdolah maakt de lez
2	renatedorrestei... se."</s><s>Spits</s><s>"Het duister dat ons scheidt is	een dijk van	een boek over een meisje dat vecht voor een beetje eig
3	renatedorrestei... </s><s>Spits</s><s>"Het duister dat ons scheidt is een	dijk van	een boek over een meisje dat vecht voor een beetje eig
4	westkappellecult... rg van Nederland boven de rivieren kon het herstel van	de dijken van	Walcheren enigszins op gang komen.</s><s>Het dijkg
5	westkappellecult... ran Nederland boven de rivieren kon het herstel van de	dijken van	Walcheren enigszins op gang komen.</s><s>Het dijkg
6	shft.nl oucht.</s><s>Bouwteam+ is een concept van Wim van	Dijk van	Klostermann ...</s><s>Dit blijkt niet alleen uit de dagelij
7	dameswielerteam... oor Annemiek van Vleuten van Rabo.</s><s>Ellen van	Dijk van	Specialized Lululemon ging met de eindwinst aan de ha
8	groene.nl zijn intussen wel vertrokken.</s><s>'s Avonds sta ik op	de dijk van	Doel, het zoemen van de kerncentrale in mijn oor.</s><
9	groene.nl intussen wel vertrokken.</s><s>'s Avonds sta ik op de	dijk van	Doel, het zoemen van de kerncentrale in mijn oor.</s><
10	cultuurpodium.n... poptempel Paradiso een waar luisterfeest.</s><s>Met	een dijk van	een stem en een muzikale bezieling waar menig vocalis
11	cultuurpodium.n... tempel Paradiso een waar luisterfeest.</s><s>Met een	dijk van	een stem en een muzikale bezieling waar menig vocalis
12	onderscheidinge... ellingen, bezetting en bewapening langs de Noordelijke	dijk van	de Bergsche Maas, daarbij met een eerste groep in eer

Data annotation and analysis

- **Annotation in Excel in terms of:**
 - **Formal properties:**
 - Det 1, Det 2, number, complexity NOUN2
 - **Evaluative semantics construction:**
 - ameliorative, pejorative, augmentative, diminutive (or combination)
 - **Semantics N2:**
 - person, animal, object, place, concept
 - **Lemma N2:**
 - Lexical variation, productivity scores (TTR, PP)

Data annotation (FR)

Referenc	Left	Kwic	Right	Exemple nr	Det 1	Det 2	Number	Lemma N2	Complexity	Semantics I	Semantic	Commen
aqui.fr	en ville avec la serre Ladéra </s><s> MB </s><s> 3 min </s><s> 2 </s><s> PUBLIÉ LE 29/01/2020 PAR Margaux Bonfils </s><s> Manger des tomates en janvier quelle	drôle d'	idée ! </s><s> Cultivées à des milliers de kilomètres, souvent sans saveur, c'est une aberration alimentaire ont constaté	1	quelle	/	singular	idée	simplex	abstract	mirativity	
vdo33.fr	les disponibilités de nos villas, les tarifs et réserver vos vacances, vous pouvez prendre contact avec Village	Drôles d'	Oiseaux. </s><s> Hors saison, nos bureaux sont ouverts du lundi au vendredi de 9h à 12h. </s><s> Nous répondons par téléphone du lundi au	2	/	/	plural	oiseau	simplex	animal	mirativity	
sdimag.fr	croise des figures tels que Otto Abetz, alors ambassadeur, en passant par la fureur des combats qui firent suite à la	drôle de	guerre... Martin, jeune étudiant insouciant et séducteur va être rattrapé par la guerre... Conditionnés par l'	3	la	/	singular	guerre	simplex	abstract	mirativity	
canalbd.net	par les vieux, rattrapés par les jeune,les parents ont décidément bien du mal ! </s><s> Nous vivons décidément une bien	drôle d'	époque, et Frédéric Jannin ne possède pas son pareil pour en capturer le mordant. </s><s> Une nouvelle fois, sa plume acérée	4	une	/	singular	époque	simplex	abstract	mirativity	modification of drôle

Results: Semantics of the construction

Dutch	French
<i>een dijk van een</i>	<i>ce/cette putain de</i>
<i>een pracht van een</i>	<i>ce/cette drôle de</i>
<i>een schat van een</i>	<i>cette saloperie de</i>
<i>een joekel van een</i>	<i>ce con de</i>
<i>een draak van een</i>	<i>cette saleté de</i>
<i>een beest van een</i>	<i>ce monstre de</i>
<i>een juweel van een</i>	<i>ce diable de</i>
<i>een kanjer van een</i>	<i>ce salaud de</i>
<i>een droom van een</i>	<i>ce connard de</i>
<i>een parel van een</i>	<i>ce bijou de</i>
<i>een knaller van een</i>	<i>cet imbécile de</i>
<i>een dot van een</i>	<i>cet idiot de</i>
<i>een boom van een</i>	<i>cet abruti de</i>
<i>een beer van een</i>	<i>cette merde de</i>
<i>een kast van een</i>	<i>cet enfoiré de</i>

Ameliorative

Pejorative

Augmentative

Results: Semantics of the construction

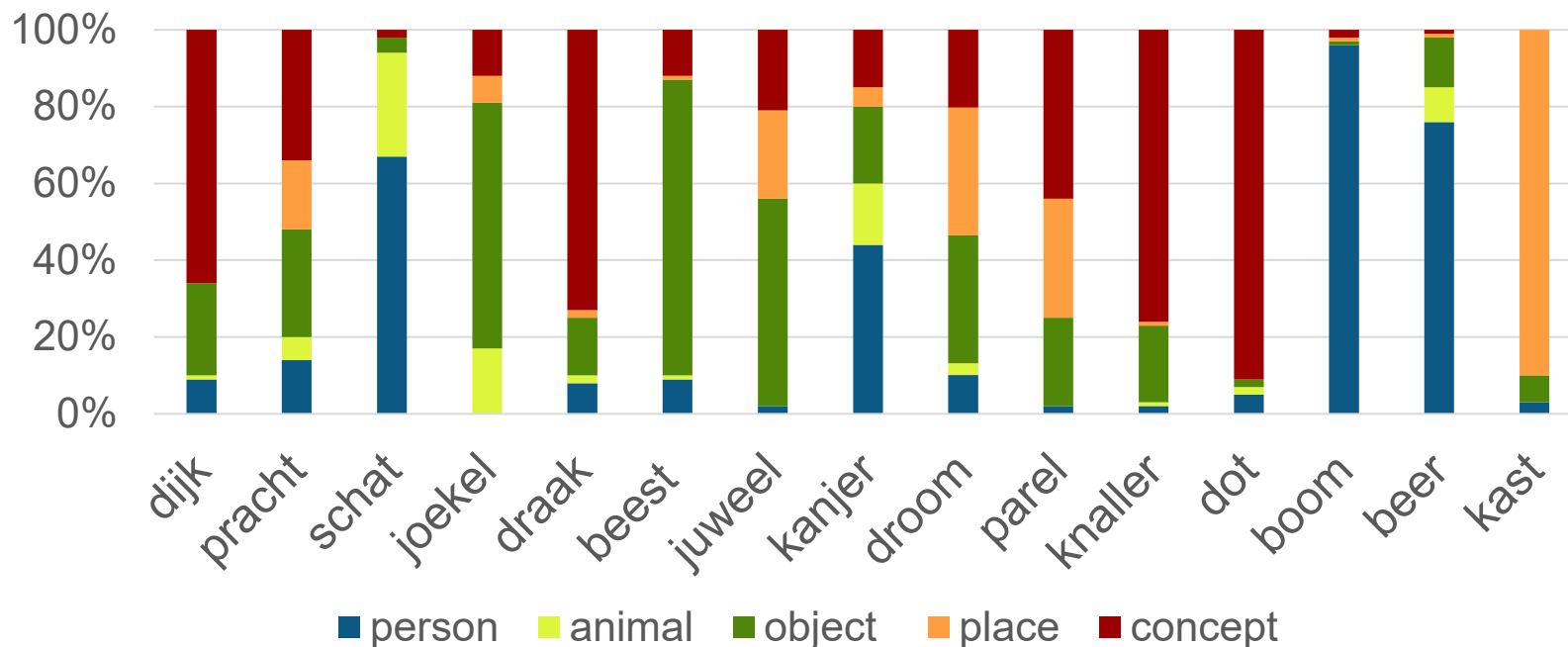
Dutch

- Mostly **ameliorative** and **augmentative** connotations
 - *een **pracht** van een kerstkaart* ‘a beauty of a Christmas card’
 - *een **joekel** van een auto* ‘a huge car’ (lit. a whopper of a car)
- Mostly (concrete/abstract) N1 with **metaphorical value**
 - DU *een **dijk** van een stem* ‘a powerful voice’ (lit. a dike of a voice)

French

- Clearly more **negative** connotations + **informal** language
 - *la **putain** de patrie* ‘that fucking fatherland’
- Mirative value in *Quelle **drôle** d’idée !* ‘What a crazy idea!’
- Often **nominalized adjective** in N1-slot
 - FR *quel(le) **imbécile** de N*

Results: Semantics N2 in Dutch



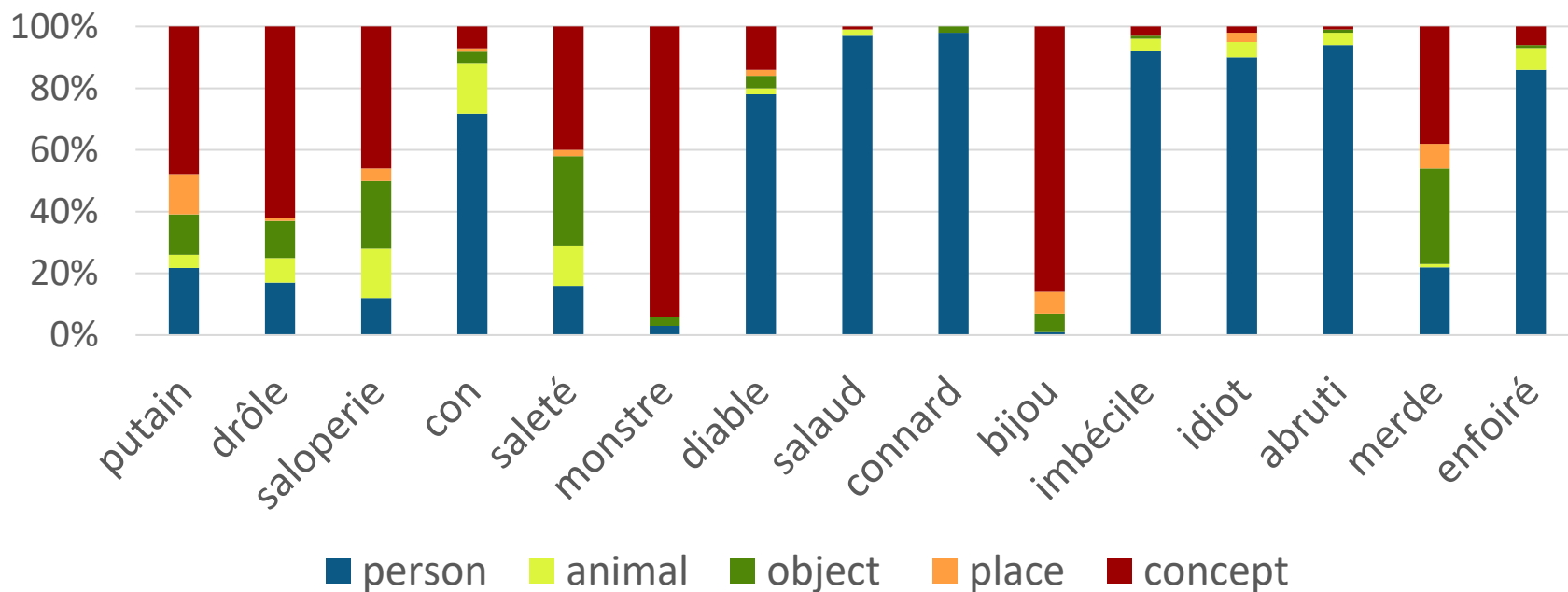
Examples with semantic variation

- *een **pracht** van een **verhaal*** (n=4) (lit. a beauty of a story) ‘a beautiful story’
- *een **kanjer** van een **boek*** (n=5) (lit. a whopper of a book) ‘a great book’
- *een **droom** van een **vakantie*** ‘a dream of a holiday’

Examples with semantic specialization

- *een **dot** van een **kans*** (n=86) (lit. a blob of a chance) ‘a golden opportunity’
- *een **boom** van een **kerel*** (n=41), ***vent*** (n=39) (lit. a tree of a man) ‘a big guy’
- *een **kast** van een **huis*** (n=80) ‘a mansion of a house, a huge house’

Results: Semantics N2 in French



Examples of semantic variation

- *Putain de merde !* (n=5) 'Fucking hell!'
- *Cette saleté de maladie* (n=4) 'this filthy disease'
- *Ces merdes de voisins* (n=3) 'those shitty neighbours'

Examples of semantic specialization

- *Mon connard de père* (n=6) 'my jerk of a father'
- *Salauds de pauvres* (n=13) 'bastards of poor people'
- *Ce monstre de puissance* (n=19) 'this monster of power'

Results: Formal properties

DET 1

Wide variation in DET1 position in Dutch:

- *wat een droom van een auto* ‘what a dream of a car’, *mijn schat van een moeder* ‘my sweetheart of a mother’, *deze pracht van een leeuw* ‘this beauty of a lion’, *vier schatten van kleinkinderen* ‘four darlings of grandchildren’,
- *de schatten van eigenaars hier* (↔ literature)

Preference for a demonstrative or exclamative in French:

- *ces saletés de laveurs de vitres* ‘those filthy window cleaners’, *cet idiot de chat* ‘that idiot of a cat’, *quel diable d’homme* ‘what a devil of a man’

DET 2

- Indefinite article or absent in Dutch
- Less frequently present in French

N2

Not only simplex nouns, also **compounds and NP**

- DU *een schat van een Engelse nanny* ‘a sweetheart of an English nanny’
- FR *ces saloperies de toilettes turques* ‘these dirty Turkish toilets’

N2 can be an **uncountable noun** (↔ literature)

- DU *een beest van geluid* ‘lit. a beast of noise’

Results: Formal properties

Number agreement

Exceptional cases of disagreement in number between N1 and N2
(↔ literature)

- DU *twee **pracht** van **kinderen*** 'lit. two beauty of children', *wat een **pracht** van een **foto's*** 'lit. what a beauty of a pictures'

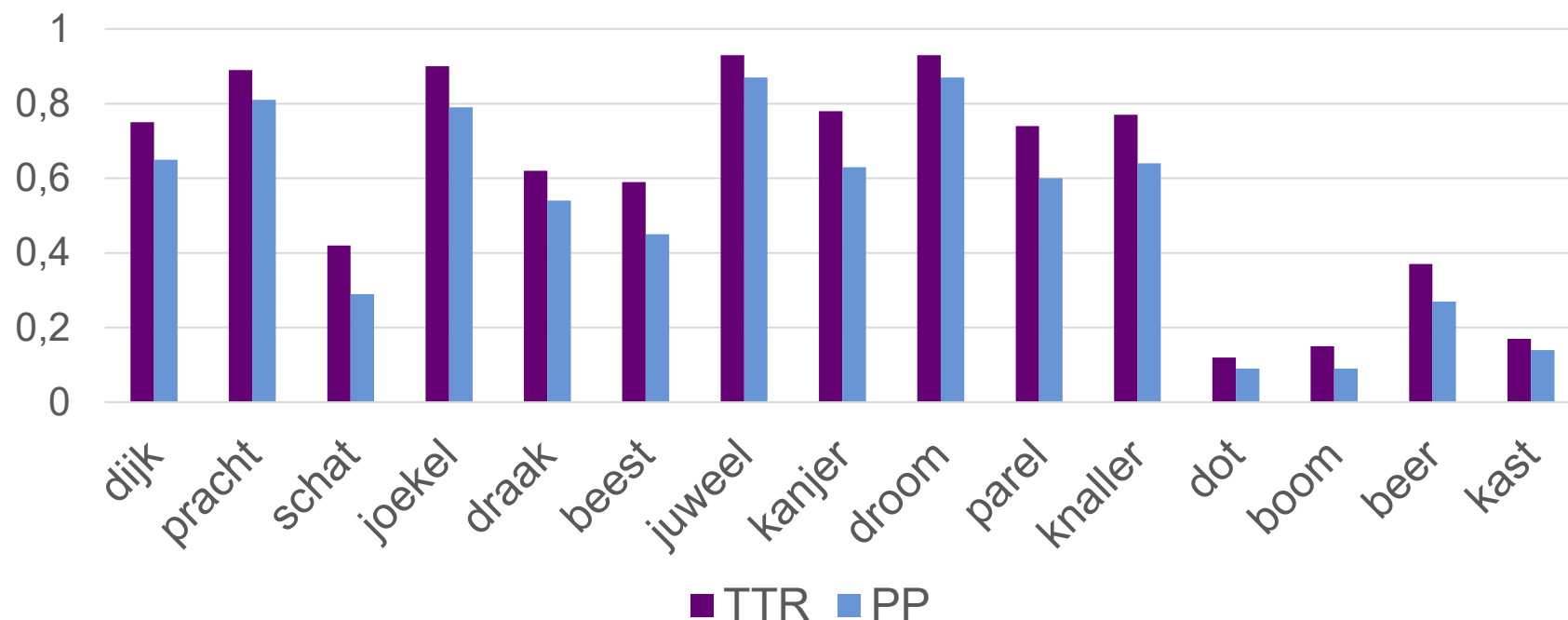
Diminutive forms of N1

- DU *een **schatje** van een hond* 'a cutie of a dog'

Adjectival modification of N1

- DU *mijn **lieve schat** van een poes* 'my sweet darling of a cat'
- FR *un **sacré putain** de bordel* 'a hell of a fucking mess'

Results: Productivity scores in Dutch



High productivity (hapaxes)

- *een joekel van een courgette* (lit. a whopper of a zucchini) ‘a giant zucchini’
- *een juweel van een doelpunt* ‘a gem of a goal’
- *een droom van een vrijgezellenfeest* ‘a dream of a bachelor party’

Results: Productivity scores in French



High productivity (hapaxes):

- *Ce **putain** de **romantisme*** ‘this fucking romanticism’
- *Une **saleté** de **bactérie*** ‘a nasty bacterium’
- *Cette **merde** de **Redbull*** ‘this crap of Redbull’

Results: Discussion

- **RQ: Cross-linguistic similarities and differences?**

- **SIMILARITIES**

- Comparable schematic pattern [DET1 N1 PREP (DET2) N2]
- Comparable evaluative semantics

- **DIFFERENCES**

- **Semantic specialization of the construction:**
ameliorative/augmentative connotation in Dutch, pejorative connotation in French
- **Formal differences:** more variation in DET1 position in Dutch than in French; DET2 mostly absent in French

Results: Discussion

- Considerable **intralingual variation**, depending on the particular pattern
 - Tension between semantic variation and specialization
 - In French: often high lexical variation (high productivity) within a same semantic field
 - [*ce(t) idiot/imbécile/enfoiré/abruti/connard* de PERSON]
 - In Dutch: high degree of idiomatization (low productivity)
 - *een kast van een huis* ‘a mansion of a house’, *een dot van een kans* ‘a golden opportunity’, *een boom van een vent/kerel* ‘a tall guy’
- **Corpus observations** which contradict claims from the literature:
 - Definite article in DET1 position is not excluded
 - N2 in Dutch is not necessarily a countable noun
 - Not always number agreement between N1 and N2

3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Pedagogical implications

- The case study demonstrates how corpus-based Construction Grammar can be integrated into linguistics teaching:
 1. Hands-on corpus work sensitizes students to subtle **semantic distinctions**
 - such as *ameliorative* versus *pejorative* evaluative meanings
 - formal and semantic variation within and across languages
 - differences in productivity within and across languages
 2. Confronting corpus data may lead students to question or refine claims found in the literature, thereby **strengthening their critical engagement with linguistic theory**
 3. This approach raises students' awareness that constructions which appear superficially similar can differ markedly in **productivity, lexical preferences, and pragmatic connotations**

Teaching manual on contrastive corpus research I

- The manual will equip students with **transferable skills**
- Students learn how to **design** contrastive corpus studies in a principled way, starting from a clearly formulated research question and proceeding through the **successive stages of corpus research**:
 - The selection of appropriate corpora (e.g. web-based reference corpora versus more specialized corpora)
 - The formulation of corpus queries
 - Data cleaning and annotation
 - Different types of (basic) analyses
 - Reporting results and interpreting them
- Explicit attention to these steps helps students understand that **corpus results are not “given”**, but are shaped by methodological choices at every stage
- They learn to apply these steps to **other constructions and languages**

Teaching manual on contrastive corpus research II

- The practical guide addresses **common pitfalls** that students encounter in contrastive corpus research.
 - The use of absolute vs. normalized frequencies
 - The comparability of samples across languages
 - Generalizability of the research
 - Correlation vs. Causation
- By reflecting on these issues, students gain a realistic understanding of the **possibilities and the limitations of corpus-based research.**
- The book can be used in **broader contexts** such as translation studies and additional language pedagogy.
- Unique focus on the **language pair Dutch-French**, relevant in the context of Belgium

References

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Takk skal du ha!

Thank you!

Dank je wel!

Merci beaucoup !